

What constructional profiles reveal about synonymy: A case study of Russian words for sadness and happiness

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Abstract

We test two hypotheses relevant to the form-meaning relationship and offer a methodological contribution to the empirical study of near-synonymy within the framework of cognitive linguistics. In addition, we challenge implicit assumptions about the nature of the paradigm, which we show is skewed in favor of a few forms that are prototypical for a given lexical item. If one accepts the claim of construction grammar that the construction is the relevant unit of linguistic analysis, then we should expect to find a relationship between the meanings of words and the constructions they are found in. One way to investigate this expectation is by examining the meaning of constructions on the basis of their lexical profile; this line of research is pursued in collostructional analyses. We have taken a different approach, examining the meaning of near-synonyms on the basis of what we call their "constructional profile". We define a constructional profile as the frequency distribution of the constructions that a word appears in. Constructional profiles for Russian nouns denoting sadness and happiness are presented, based upon corpus data, and analyzed quantitatively (using chi square and hierarchical cluster analysis). The findings are compared to the introspective analyses offered in synonym dictionaries. © 2009 by Walter de Gruyter GmbH.

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Keywords

Construction Grammar, Corpus data, Russian, Synonymy